CHAPTER TWO

Apocalyptism, Environmentalism and the Other in Don DeLillo's *End Zone*, *Great Jones Street* and *Ratner's Star*

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Chapter summary: Throughout his writing, Don DeLillo has demonstrated a proclivity for thinking about the end. This subject emerges in various ways: through the discussion of nuclear war and chemical spills as well as an individual's fear of their inevitable demise. However, though DeLillo's fiction may explore multiple meanings of 'end' and though our anxiety for the end may remain, the ability for us to understand or predict the end is constantly changing. In contemporary eco-criticism, critics suggest that apocalyptism paves the way for new forms of thinking about our environment, as well as our relationships with others. This essay will look at three novels from the 1970s, *End Zone* (1972) *Great Jones Street* (1973) and *Ratner's Star* (1976) to trace how DeLillo creates fictions that think through the ethics of representation, in which 'ending' means to re-think our relationship to others. In doing this, he suggests that we must adapt our nuclear anxiety to form new social and ethical connections.

‘Everyone wants to own the end of the world’

The opening line of Don DeLillo’s 2016 novel *Zero* K reads ‘*Everyone wants to own the end of the world*’ (2016: 3; italics in original). Though this seems to be an extension of Eric Packer’s thinking in *Cosmopolis* (2003), that the rich may indeed get to own the world in an age of ever-increasing wealth and inequality, this line also reveals DeLillo’s interest in reconceiving how it is the that the ‘end of the world’ does affect ‘everyone’. In this novel, protagonist Jeffrey Lockhart’s father, a wealthy businessman, and his stepmother, an archaeologist, are cryonically frozen; for them their ‘end of the world’ or in effect, their death, is something they have chosen for themselves. They have been able to partake in an experimental extension of life through this voluntary procedure. However, the novel is also filled with other individuals, victims of wars and disasters, projected onto a screen in the facility in which this new science is taking place. For those individuals, who owns the end of their worlds? And how can fiction represent them? This opening sentence reveals the evolving concerns of a writer who has developed a keen interest in exploring the intersections of economy, environment and representations of the other over the course of his career. In this chapter, I reassess DeLillo’s use of an end point to think about the cultural preoccupation with death on an individual and mass scale. Though DeLillo’s late fiction is often discussed in terms of its suspended temporality and attention to the experiential in the 21st century (see Boxall 2012; Viermuelen 2015; and Gander in this volume: xx), I suggest that DeLillo’s early novels demonstrate his desire for a fiction that thinks through the ethics of representation, in which ‘ending’ means to re-think our relationship to others. By looking at three early novels, *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973) and *Ratner’s Star* (1976), I demonstrate how DeLillo’s interest in endings has always involved thinking about who is represented

in that ending and how our anxiety for our own deaths can be transformed into a greater sense of shared humanity.

Fiction and endings

The novel as a form, in its own replica of a literal forward movement of pages, or expressed as a percentage on an e-reader, unavoidably contains a beginning, a middle, and an end, in which the experience of the end is foreshadowed not only in the very process of reading, but in the physical lessening of pages. The material object of the book cannot help but echo our own experience of a linear movement in time, ending in death. Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending,* an eschatologically-focused study, explores how fiction and the structures of fiction engage with the dread of apocalypse. For him, Christianity in Western philosophy has produced a death-obsessed canon. He suggests that:

> in so far as we claim to live now in a period of perpetual transition we have merely elevated the interstitial period into an 'age' or saeculum in its own right, and the age of perpetual transition in technological and artistic matters is understandably an age of perpetual crisis in morals and politics. And so, changed by our special pressures, subdued by our scepticism, the paradigms of apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world. (Kermode [1967] 2010: 28)

For Kermode, 'the paradigms of apocalypse' underscore all Western writing, subverted into an anxiety for the end point of the novel. Reading becomes a way of making sense of the world by replaying our concerns for its continuation within narrative. Kermode identifies that this 'sense of an ending' (98) is the manifestation

of our desire to be able to know the temporal limits of our existence. He suggests an ever-present fear, an 'eschatological anxiety' (95) in response to this 'perpetual crisis'.

Throughout his oeuvre, DeLillo thematizes the knowledge of the end, in the descriptions of a myriad of events that may hasten it. In *White Noise*, Jack Gladney tells a class of students that 'All plots tend to move deathward'; later, Jack's colleague Murray asserts that 'To plot is to live', a way of forming 'a shape, a plan' ([1985] 2011: 26, 291, 291). In both phrases a plot becomes a marker of time, a progression that both extends and limits existence. Like Kermode, DeLillo questions how our underlying knowledge of death necessitates the manifestation of the end in a fictional guise as a way of recasting our anxieties. But, as Winnie Richards in *White Noise* also suggests, these end points necessarily shape our existence: 'You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border or limit' (228-9). Borders, limits and end-points abound in DeLillo not just as conceptual indicators but as real and literal markers that determine our lived experience. But, in his consistent refiguring of implicit death, one starts to wonder if DeLillo's interest is not in the inevitability of death but its difficulty to predict in the face of Kermode's 'perpetual crisis'. Though DeLillo was famously called 'the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American literature' (Towers 1988),[1] in this essay I propose to think about fictions not through paranoia, but through anxiety. Mark Osteen notes that 'DeLillo's novels resist the terminality they so desperately seek: they almost invariably end by not ending, sometimes circling back to their beginnings, sometimes offering ambiguous epilogues that cast doubt on their apocalyptic denouements, and sometimes trailing off indeterminately' (2000: 32). This ambiguity and indeterminacy, I suggest, evokes an

existential anxiety, or what Osteen terms ‘postmodern dread’, through which DeLillo’s fictions are brought to bear. By playing on our ‘universal desire for fictional closure’ (Osteen 2000: 32), DeLillo’s fiction continually refigures it, exposing society’s basis on the ‘perpetual crisis’ of which Kermode speaks. This simultaneous movement towards and away from an end point is, for Peter Boxall, characteristic of the earlier period of DeLillo’s writing. He states that ‘DeLillo’s work up to *Underworld* (1997) is angled toward an historical terminus due to arrive somewhere at the end of the century, and the rhythm and balance of his prose is shaped, at its most intimate level, by this movement both toward and away from such a moment of finitude’ (2012: 686). If the end is necessary to allow us to understand meaning, to narrow our anxiety to a specific point which we both crave and reject, how then is our anxiety attenuated when we do not have a specific moment on which to focus it?

The apocalypse and the environment

Thus far, I have considered DeLillo’s attention to the end in the abstract. But how does his fiction represent specific end points? Elizabeth K. Rosen has argued that ‘the atomic bomb haunts Don DeLillo’s novels’ and ‘remains for this author the ultimate symbol of the end’ (2008: 143). This is hardly surprising for a novelist who grew up during the Cold War and came of age while the bomb existed as both a very real threat, and as a symbol for struggles between global ideologies. The effects of that time were referred to as a pervasive ‘nuclear anxiety’: children were taught to ‘duck and cover’, adults cheerfully sold bomb shelters and the population generally told to prepare for the worst.[2] DeLillo depicts the bomb in various novels: in *White Noise*, Jack Gladney and his family have to be evacuated from their suburban town after a

so-called ‘airborne toxic event’, a gaseous black cloud that appears after toxic leak caused by a train accident; in *Underworld*, the novel portrays two events from 3 October 1951, the so-called ‘shot heard around the world’ that took place in the baseball match between the Dodgers and the Giants, and Russia’s nuclear test. Nuclear and chemical apocalypses abound, figured and re-figured, but never causing complete destruction. Instead, this nuclear fear hangs over his novels, as part of the very fabric of his writing.

If, as Kermode suggests, history has proved eschatological predictions wrong so that ‘no longer imminent, the End is immanent’ ([1967] 2010: 25), not a moment about to arrive, but a moment always present, how does this affect the representation of an end point in fiction? The plethora of complex environmental issues affecting the planet, provide a new framework through which this end point is made present. Within eco-criticism, apocalypticism and environmentalism are conceptually linked: Lawrence Buell acknowledges the importance of apocalyptic thinking for the furtherance of environmental action: ‘Apocalypse is the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal. […] The rhetoric of apocalyptism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis’ (1995: 285). Buell’s description vocalizes the dominance of certain types of discourses, anxieties that might be most readily available even if they are not the most pressing. We may, for example, be anxious about the reawakened threat of nuclear war in light of Donald Trump’s antagonism of North Korea, but the concurrent hurricanes, wildfires, and earthquakes of August and September 2017 have less readily available individuals to blame. As Molly Wallace has recently discussed:

> If we may once have believed that the end of days would come in a blaze of nuclear firestorm (or the chill of the subsequent nuclear winter), we now suspect that the apocalypse may be much slower, creeping in as chemical toxin, climate change, or bio- or nanotechnologies run amok, and in this new company, it is perhaps not the fiery blast but the radioactive spill that moves to the fore. In the age of risk, the apocalypse cannot be avoided through the "rational" deterrence of mutually assured destruction, for destruction in this case is unintentional, coming as a consequence less of dramatic decisions of the strategists than of the mundane results of peaceful business as usual—the push of aerosol spray, the flick of a light switch, the disposal of a laptop computer. (2016: 29)

Not only are the causes of climate change more difficult to understand and see than we may want, but its victims are sometimes made invisible. Rob Nixon's study *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* looks to 'calamities that are slow and long lasting' confronting the 'representational bias' of those who suffer the most (2011: 6, 13). He comments that 'Casualties from slow violence - human and environmental - are the casualties most likely not to be seen, not to be counted' (13). In this, the 'slow violence' enacted is both physical and representational, a process of systematic oppression. Naomi Klein's work demonstrates the rapaciousness of corporations in times of political and environmental upheaval. In *The Shock Doctrine,* she notes that tragedies have become immediate opportunities to deregulate, where politicians and corporations use 'moments of collective trauma to engage in radical social and economic engineering' (Klein 2007: 8). For Klein, environmental politics are deeply entrenched with neoliberal capitalism, and the inequalities they generate. In her subsequent work she has also suggested that 'The climate crisis, by presenting

the species with an existential crisis and putting us on a firm and unyielding science-based deadline, might just be the catalyst we need to knit together the great many powerful movements bound together by the inherent worth and value of all people' (2016: 11).

Klein's proposition about the climate crisis speaks suggestively to the emergence of a greater attention to environmentalism in DeLillo studies. Elise Martucci's monograph *The Environmental Unconscious in the Fiction of Don DeLillo* looks at the way DeLillo's fictions interact with the environments that produce them. Martucci notes that 'DeLillo's characters exhibit an often repressed awareness of the natural world underlying their image-dominated environment. It is this awareness and the subsequent desire to connect with their material world that illuminates environmental consequences and challenges the conditions of our postindustrial society' (2008: 3). Using the work of Buell, Martucci suggests that DeLillo's 'environmentalism' is not immediately recognizable as eco-criticism, but is instead a way of vocalizing an 'environmental unconscious', a way of reconceiving of ourselves in the world that gives greater attention to the ethical and political repercussions of our daily life. Rebecca Rey also notes DeLillo's interest in the environment in his 2007 play, *The Word for Snow*. Like Martucci, she notes that 'there is no mention of the science behind the environmental changes described; rather, a sense of awe at omnipotent power pervades the play' (Rey 2016: 400). In this play, as well as in a range of his other fiction, Rey recognizes a new attention to the environment as a way of encouraging debate in the American populis. Michael Jones also reads DeLillo's late fiction through climate change, suggesting that his late short stories express a new kind of 'realist locality'; through moments of sudden exposure to the possible lives of others, his writing becomes a way of 'extending the reach of human empathy to an

object as big as the Earth' (2017: 7). Martucci and Jones evoke the problem of scale, in the difficulty thinking environmentally poses, whether in connecting with 'the material world' or 'extending the reach of human empathy'. All three writers note the issue of locality, or indeed proximity, in environmental action, posing the question: what is an environmental consciousness if it does not take into account the intersections between poverty, race and gender?

Transformative anxiety: *End Zone, Great Jones Street* and *Ratner's Star*

White Noise is often thought of as DeLillo's apocalyptic novel *par excellence*, for its depiction of the 'airborne toxic event' and pervasive nuclear anxiety. Underscoring the novel, however, is a question about representation:

> These things happen to poor people who live in exposed areas. Society is set up in such a way that it's the poor and the uneducated who suffer the main impact of natural and man-made disasters. People in low-lying areas get the floods, people in shanties get the hurricanes and tornados. I'm a college professor. Did you ever see a college professor rowing a boat down his own street in one of those TV floods? We live in a neat and pleasant town near a college with a quaint name. These things don't happen in places like Blacksmith. ([1985] 2011: 114)

Nixon and Klein have noted that environmental catastrophes primarily affect the most vulnerable within a society, whether it is victims of natural disasters, deforestation, or globalization. In this extract, Jack suggests that the very location of a suburban town functions as a talisman against disaster; if they don't happen in Blacksmith, where do they happen?

In DeLillo's second novel *End Zone*, he proposes a relationship between war and football, exposing the obfuscating jargon that dominates contemporary warfare and the euphemisms created to mask its real horrors. The novel's protagonist Gary Harkness, a dropout from several colleges across the U.S., has ended up at Logos College, in West Texas. The novel is haunted by the language of violence and mass extinction. In his use of football, the supreme American pastime, DeLillo exposes the implicit violence within what appears wholesome. At one point Gary asserts that 'the football player travels the straightest of lines […] his actions uncomplicated by history, enigma, holocaust or dream' ([1972] 2011: 3). However, in the course of the novel DeLillo demonstrates how easily the language of the game slips into the language of apocalyptism, as Gary and his colleagues become increasingly concerned with the threat of nuclear disaster and mass extinction.

The novel's title places the narrative in a literal 'end zone', both the place on a football pitch and also a place of ending. Gary Harkness becomes obsessed with nuclear holocausts after coming across a book about the subject at the University of Miami. He develops a taste for reading and thinking about the possibility of destruction:

> I liked reading about the deaths of tens of millions of people. I liked dwelling on the destruction of great cities. Five to twenty million dead. Fifty to a hundred million dead. Ninety percent population loss. Seattle wiped out by mistake. Moscow demolished ... I liked to think of huge buildings toppling, of firestorms, of bridges collapsing, survivors roaming the charred countryside. Carbon-14 and strontium-90. (20).

In Gary's detailed imaginings, he enacts a simultaneous desire for and fear of the end, chiming with Boxall's reading of DeLillo's pre-*Underworld* fiction. In reading about

these deaths, Gary suggests his own ability to instigate them, a kind of wish fulfilment. Reading and imagining these atrocities affords him a form of agency in the face of an unknown and unquantifiable threat. Moreover, his thinking is formed in lists, catalogued numerically. In the terms that he uses, the figures that he imagines, and indeed the chemicals he names, there are no specifics as to what a nuclear atrocity might look like. Though he may think of 'Five to twenty million dead', the victims of this imagined attack are homogenised. In making victims merely numbers, Harkness imagines only uniform, abstract bodies.

Though Gary's individual fear and longing for the end occupy the main narrative, circling around his fantasies are the bodies of others. Gary is notably absent from what he describes, choosing Milwaukee as a site for these obliterations, a place to which he has never been (41). The irony that underscores this, of course, is that there can be no separation between individuals during nuclear warfare because an atomic bomb does not discriminate. The novel hints at this early on in an aside: '(Exile or outcast: distinctions tend to vanish when the temperature exceeds one hundred)' (6). If history is the 'placement of bodies' (43), then in *End Zone*, DeLillo asks: whose bodies?

Though Harkness' ethnicity is not specified (we read him as white), DeLillo is also concerned with representing the anxieties of his Jewish roommate Anatole Bloomberg and Taft Robinson, star player and 'first black student to be enrolled at Logos College' (3). For Bloomberg his huge weight becomes a way of making himself larger than his own history, in order to 'unjew' (71) himself. Bloomberg proposes this as a way of existing 'beyond guilt, beyond blood, beyond the ridiculous past' (72). In going 'beyond' Bloomberg suggests new expansive ways of being that surpass one's particular identity, a way of asserting himself as an individual free from

a historical past. However, when colleague Andy Chudko responds with a ‘seminar on the future of the earth’ (72), which he delivers in the first person plural, he presents another way of going ‘beyond’ that means no individual has bear the weight of inherited trauma. Instead, in his pronouncement that ‘[s]oon we’ll harvest the seas, colonize the planets, control every aspect of the weather’ (72) he counteracts Bloomberg’s worry about his identity, with a new united community of individuals who have complete control of their environment.

Taft Robinson, like Gary, has been gradually losing interest in playing football and is isolated for much of the novel. When Gary goes to visit Taft in his bare room, they discuss their idiosyncratic reading choices. Whilst Gary reads about ‘mass destruction and suffering’ (229), Taft reads about ‘atrocities…the ovens, the showers, experiments’ (229-30) of the Nazis during the Holocaust. In their shared horror of these real catastrophes, Gary asks ‘There must be something we can do’ (230). Taft delivers a powerful response: ‘A name’s a name. A place could just as easily be another place. Abraham was black. Did you know that? Mary the mother of Jesus was black. Rembrandt and Bach had some Masai blood. It’s all in the history books if you look closely enough’ (230). Though Taft, like Gary, may read as a way of alleviating his anxiety for nuclear warfare, reading what has come before as a way of deadening the horror of what may be to come, he also looks for a way of understanding a history that could represent him.

In DeLillo’s attention to Bloomberg’s Jewishness, as well as Taft’s reading, he seems to be harking back to the origin of the word ‘Holocaust’, used now to describe the effects of a potential nuclear warfare. By reminding the reader of the history of this word, he draws attention to other kinds of human disasters that haunt the present moment as a way of making other kinds of suffering visible. In linking together the

Holocaust with the historic subjugation of African Americans, DeLillo explores the relationship between genocides, exposing the nuclear crisis as a moment to, as Klein suggested 'knit together' different communities. In Gary's desire to do 'something' DeLillo suggests forming new ethical bonds between people, as opposed to suffering individually. What Martucci terms DeLillo's 'environmental unconscious', here might be termed as an expansive anxiety for the other, an ethical psychic solidarity.

In his subsequent novel, *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo's attention has moved away from the Texan desert and back to his home city of New York. DeLillo has often returned to this city as a setting for his novels, but what makes this novel particularly important is his specificity; unlike *End* Zone, DeLillo furnishes this novel with exact detail from New York at that time, specifically rooting it in the impoverishment of the 1970s. In an early interview with Tom LeClair he commented of New York:

> The streets are full of disturbed people. For a long time I wondered where they were coming from, so many, at once. We now learn they've been let out of asylums and hospitals and into halfway houses and welfare hotels. I've always thought New York was a medieval city and this is another sign of that […] In the subway arcades under Fourteenth Street you hear mostly Spanish and black English with bits of Yiddish, German, Italian, and Chinese, and then there's this strange, broken language. The language of the insane is stronger than all the others. It's the language of the self, the pain of self. (LeClair [1982] 2005: 13)

The landscape of New York is, for DeLillo, dominated by the people who live there (see McKinney in this volume, pp. xx). In this description DeLillo implicitly comments on the care of the mentally ill; their presence becomes a marker of the lack of available resources for them. Simultaneously, he also notes the linguistic make up

the city, made not only of multiple languages (see Lauret in this volume, pp. xx), but also of 'the strange, broken language' that voices the 'pain of self'. This observation seems to come directly from DeLillo's experience at the time, as he later comments to Adam Begley:

> When I was working on the book there were beggars and derelicts in parts of the city they'd never entered before. A sense of failed souls and forgotten lives on a new scale. And the place began to feel a little like a community in the Middle Ages. Disease on the streets, insane people talking to themselves, the drug culture spreading among the young. We're talking about the very early 1970s, and I remember thinking of New York as a European City in the fourteenth century. (Begley [1993] 2005: 94-95)

After substantial investment during the New Deal, which led to the development of an advanced public sector, New York in the 1970s reached a period of crisis. Though the very early 1970s did not see the same full-scale austerity inflicted by the President Gerald Ford after he was elected in 1974, New York's landscape was severely impoverished during this period. Moreover, the title itself also makes a comment about that time: though Anthony DeCurtis commented that 'Great Jones Street is no different from Main Street or Wall Street: it offers no haven, no safe retreat' (1991: 134), I suggest that the street itself shapes the concerns of the novel; only covering two blocks, Great Jones Street is nestled between Broadway and the Bowery. Though small, it is still a part of Manhattan's Greenwich Village, historically home to many artists such as Jean Michel Basquiat and Charles Mingus, as well as New York's large homeless population.

In the opening, following on from the 'end zone' of the previous novel, DeLillo situates the novel in 'endland' ([1973] 2011: 5). Bucky explains: 'I was interested in

endings, in how to survive a dead idea' (5) In looking for 'certain personal limits' (5), Bucky has come to a place among artists and drug addicts. In these preliminary sentences, the novel contrasts celebrity, one which lauds excess as part of the accoutrements of fame, with a different kind of excess, found in the drug users of a financially starved Manhattan. Bucky seems to sense some oncoming danger**:** 'I was preoccupied with conserving myself for some unknown ordeal to come' (19-20). This is perhaps due to the effects of the Cold War; when Bucky notes 'Great Jones, Bond Street, the Bowery. These places are deserts too' (90), he seems to be implicitly unifying New York with the desert landscape of the previous novel, suggesting Great Jones Street as a troubling echo of the Texan desert. However, as noted above, DeLillo suggests that poverty is part of the landscape of the city: 'New York seemed older than the cities of Europe, a sadistic gift of the sixteenth century, ever on the verge of a plague' (5). In this perpetual crisis, DeLillo conceives of the effects of a decimated public sector in the language of disaster, an ever-present 'plague'.

Though many critics have noted DeLillo's exploration into systems of excess through the drug/tape plot,[3] the underlying economy of the novel is engaged with a form of *laissez-faire* neoliberalism that, post-2008 crash, we would now term austerity. Through repeated attention to the homeless and the mentally ill, it seems DeLillo specifically wants to draw attention to crowds of individuals who are disenfranchised and actively prohibited from participating in global capital. Like Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider*, released four years before this novel, DeLillo questions the achievements of counter-culture; by borrowing the guise of a counter-cultural movement, the Happy Valley Farm Commune distort the aims of earlier more optimistic collective action. Instead, by easily co-opting musicians into nefarious organization, DeLillo suggests how musicians become mere purveyors of products.

Though Bucky's retreat to Great Jones Street may have come from a sincere desire to reject extremes, the ability of any individual to merely remove themselves from systems they find distasteful is nigh on impossible. As Osteen comments of both DeLillo's early and later writing, 'it remains politically charged and self-critical because it dramatizes how aesthetic and ascetic withdrawal may easily be transformed into apologies for violence, consumer numbness, and exploitation' (2000: 59).

In the last chapter, in Bucky's enforced silence, he can hear the words of these others who have been made invisible by market forces and austerity politics. To return to DeLillo's earlier comments he notes of the final chapter that

> I think this is how urban people react to the deteriorating situation around them—I think we need to invent beauty, search out some restoring force. A writer may describe the ugliness and pain in graphic terms but he can also try to find a dignity and significance in ruined parts of the city, and the people he sees there. Ugly and beautiful—this is part of the tension of *Great Jones Street.* (Begley [1993] 2005: 94)

DeLillo attempts to reinvent not only the language of the novel, but also the formal constraints of the novel that had been hitherto subsumed in character and plot. In this final chapter, Bucky's wandering around New York is also a way of affording space for those marginalised individuals to speak. In his descriptions of the people he sees, Bucky provides the most beautiful language in which he gives voice to the poor and homeless who have *always* been present:

> This one day of late rain I saw a toothless man circle a cart banked with glowing produce. He bellowed into the wind, one of nature's raw warriors, flapping around in unbuckled galoshes. A few people huddled nearby. One would now and then extend a hand toward the cart, finger-pricing, as

> the man wailed to the blank windows above him. It was a religious cry he produced, evocative of mosques and quaking sunsets ([1973] 2011: 245).

Here we see an example of DeLillo's 'broken' language, giving voice to the 'pain of self'; Through this man's bellowing, he evokes 'mosques and quaking sunsets' quasi-spiritual and prophetic noises that seem to reach beyond language. The language of plagues and disaster then are used not to predict imminent endings, but to render the individual experiences of the homeless community in the Bowery more visible. By considering its setting, the novel is readily understood as a critique not only of what he later terms 'fame-making apparatus' (DeLillo 1997: n.p.) but also of the austerity politics that DeLillo saw decimating his home city. In *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo transforms the nuclear anxiety of *End Zone*, into a rally against the devastating effects on a diverse community that, for DeLillo, are essential to the foundation of New York.

Though *Ratner's Star* is a departure for DeLillo in its focus on mathematics and its ostensibly science-fiction plot, it still meditates on the relationship between anxiety, ending and death. Billy Twillig, a 14-year-old Nobel laureate and mathematics genius, is recruited to decipher a message that has apparently been sent from another planet, a message that is predicted to tell 'us something of importance about ourselves' ([1976] 1991: 91). However, in the course of the novel, the message is discovered to be the co-ordinates for an eclipse, a prediction that has come from an ancient unknown civilization. Though this may not be a disaster in a conventional sense, DeLillo uses the eclipse, and indeed uncertainty in the face of the unknown, to think through connections forged between individuals and communities.

The novel is propelled by a range of characters fluent in the language of various forms of mathematics but it is also underscored by a furious anxiety to understand the

meaning of the code. Field Experiment Number One, the facility in which the novel takes place, is built for scientific knowledge, housing, according to one of the scientists 'Single Planetary consciousness. Rational approach. World view' (21). However, in Billy's conversations with several different individuals with multiple specialities (including, the history of mathematics, red ants, and Aboriginal mysticism), exchanges that often descend into nonsense, DeLillo satirizes this idea of rationality as the most important form of communication. In the second part of the novel, 'Reflections', Billy joins a team attempting to create 'a universal logical language' (285). This language, which aims to be literally universal – intelligible even to extra-terrestrials – is also 'not designed to be spoken' (289). Like Bloomberg's logical approach to his own identity, this language of universal logic renders the human beings it is supposed to represent invisible.

At the end of the novel, after the revelation about the real content of the message, DeLillo explores the effects of this miscalculation. Remarkably like the last chapter of *Great Jones Street*, DeLillo returns not just to crowd scenes, but descriptions of poverty. Introduced with the phrase 'system interbreak' (429), a way of suggesting a marked change in tone from the 'system' of the novel, DeLillo follows the eclipse through Asia in close detail. The novel has been formally diverse throughout, but here these paragraphs are addressed to a 'you', inviting an implied dialogue between 'you' and 'I'. In these descriptions, DeLillo varyingly contrasts the effects of the eclipse on remote areas of the world, including both hardships and pleasures of day-to-day life: 'this nearly sunset occurrence, shadow moving toward the eastmost Ganges, choleroid feces, choleroid dehydration, choleroid vomit, girls with finger-cymbals laughing in a mango grove' (430). Even though the eclipse darkens the world momentarily, DeLillo

uses it as a way of cast light on a part of the world that would have been otherwise invisible in the discourse of the novel, and the language of the scientists.

For Charles Molesworth the focus on place here is particularly important, as 'the poverty of India and Bangladesh shatters the "placeless" virtues of the scientific project that has been the novel's focus for the preceding four hundred pages' (1991: 144). Of course, for these individuals in India and Bangladesh, though an eclipse is palpably not the end of the world, it is experienced as an unexplained event in the world in which they live. The scientists in the facility may seek to explore connections, but these are only in the abstract; they maintain a distance between themselves and others, perpetuating hierarchies of knowledge that exclude the less economically advantaged. By including this scene at the end of the novel, as Molesworth outlines, DeLillo asks the reader to rethink the extra-terrestrial message that was supposed to 'us something of importance about ourselves'. Osteen also notes the importance of this scene, suggesting 'The experience certainly will dislodge Billy Twillig's formalism, and may push him towards a more humane awareness of his fellow creatures' (2000: 96). Martucci agrees, suggesting that DeLillo attempts to 'awaken a global sense of place' (2008: 145). In these important pages, DeLillo asks how the message Billy has been aiming to decipher all along might be reimaged as a 'life-cry' ([1976] 1991: 433) of those made invisible in languages or discourses that ignore them.

'The democratic shout'

As Rosen notes, 'DeLillo's interest has always been the role of apocalyptic sensibility in our lives' (2008: 144). In DeLillo's earliest fiction, we can plot the emergence of a more expansive attention, in which the fear of a threat to oneself is

recalibrated to become increased care for others. In each of the three novels I have mentioned above, DeLillo seeks to balance the interests of the protagonist with the world around them. In the final chapter of *Zero K*, as Jeffrey rides a bus, he sees what is colloquially referred to as the 'Manhattanhenge', the moment at sunset when the sun falls exactly between the enormous skyscrapers of Manhattan: 'the streets were charged with the day's dying light and the bus seemed the carrier of this radiant moment' (2016: 273). Like the eclipse of *Ratner's Star*, this is another kind of environmental event, a moment that allows the individuals experiencing it to rethink their connection to their surroundings. Travelling alone, except for a few other people on the bus, Jeffrey is 'startled by a human wail' (273). He realizes that it is coming from a young boy, sitting at the back of the bus. They are united in a moment of shared wonder: 'I didn't know what this event was called but I was seeing it now and so was the boy, whose urgent cries were suited to the occasion, and the boy himself, thick-bodied, an oversized head, swallowed up in the vision' (273-4). He is reminded of the novel's opening words and, in the boy's disability, Jeffrey wonders if 'this was what the boy was seeing?' (274). The ambiguity of this moment characterizes the central claim of my argument: in this moment of contact, in which Jeffrey imagines an environmental event from the perspective of a vulnerable individual, he expands his fear for the end to become a fear for humanity. Jeffrey modifies his reading of the boy: 'I told myself that the boy was not seeing the sky collapse upon us but was finding the purest astonishment in the intimate touch of earth and sun' (274). In his reframing of the boy's vision, his shout becomes a kind of salvation: 'I didn't need heaven's light. I had the boy's cries of wonder' (174). In *Mao II* (1991) DeLillo specifically engages with the politics of representation:

> Do you know why I believe in the novel? It's a democratic shout. Anybody can write a great novel, one great novel, almost any amateur off the street […] Some nameless drudge, some desperado with barely a nurtured dream can sit down and find his voice and luck out and do it. Something so angelic it makes your jaw hang open. The spray of talent, the spray of ideas. One thing unlike another, one voice unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints. ([1991] 1992: 156)

The possible novel, existing in everyone, is a messy, clashing thing, made up of 'ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints', but the novel is itself 'a democratic shout' a means of representing everyone. Whilst reading as a Whitmanic call to arms, it also speaks to another concern about representation; the boy's cry, like the earlier 'bellow' in *Great Jones Street*, or the 'life-cry' in *Ratner's Star*, functions as the 'democratic shout' from *Mao II*, calling out for a radical solidarity within fiction.

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NOTES

[1] Much of DeLillo's fiction has been read through a paranoiac lens, through which the reader and character are united in their desire to find some underlying causality for often complex and interweaving plots. We can see this as part of DeLillo's larger strategy of analysing feelings of cultural anxiety, exacerbated by some of the events of the late 20th century such as the assassination of JFK, the Cold War, the Vietnam War and Watergate. In DeLillo's early fictions like *Running Dog* and *Players,* he explores the cultural malaise of the middle classes through plots influenced by spy thrillers. In later work such as *Libra* and *Underworld,* this paranoia becomes a formal strategy as a means of questioning the formation of national history and myth. For more discussion on paranoia in DeLillo, see Knight (1999), O'Donnell (2000) and Allen (2000).

[2] For more on the cultural and psychological effects of the Cold War, see Seed (2012).

[3] For example, Anthony DeCurtis suggests that 'the drug and Wunderlick's music, no matter how authentically conceived or individually created, are both products, and the buying and selling of products is what makes the world of *Great Jones Street* turn' (1991: 137).